

## The Late Archibald Fairbairn, Esq., F.S.A. (Scot).

BY MISS A. L. SHAW SMITH.



Archibald Fairbairn, Miss Clark and Dr. James Clark.

*By Courtesy of the Glenfield Ramblers.*

Perhaps it would be difficult to say in which capacity Mr. Fairbairn will be best remembered, as an archaeologist, as a naturalist, or as a fine example of a Scottish gentleman. He was born at Carsphairn, and while of tender years came to Muirkirk when his father was appointed head gamekeeper to the late Col. J. G. A. Baird of Wellwood, Muirkirk parish, and of Colstoun, Haddington; and it was at Wellwood that he lived for the rest of his long life. In due course he succeeded to his father's post, and when the estate was sold served the late R. L. Angus in the same capacity.

Reared as he was, under a father who could and did give him much encouragement and help, he had every opportunity of studying Nature in all her moods. Being a friend of our family, he often recalled his young days, and most interesting indeed were these tales. He always had a sporting dog, and also a terrier, and while he preferred a pedigree, the animal had also to prove itself able to do its work. His usual companion as a child was a Scottish terrier, and one in particular was death to all vermin. He had also on one occasion trained a falcon, but the bird eventually met with an accident and he never trained another. Naturally, he knew every square yard of the district, for in the course of his duties he had to traverse many miles of moor and bog in all weathers. His favourite dress for these journeys was the kilt, for he said it swung clear of the wet heather while he walked barefoot on the grass.

Mr. Fairbairn was a great lover of nature, and a ramble with him was a real education. Although killing was part of his job, he did not do so for its own sake. For example, on one occasion when a shoot was being arranged, he learned that some deer were in the vicinity and had them shooed out of the neighbourhood lest danger should threaten them. It was his duty to hunt foxes when they made raids on lambs in the spring, and from their location he could tell from which den they came. But he never killed the parents without seeing to the cubs, which were brought to the stables and looked after there till plans had been made for their future. Knowing that I was much interested in wild animals, he never omitted to send word for me to come to see the cubs, and though he offered me one as a pet on every occasion my parents wisely would not allow me to accept.

Probably one of the first talks Mr. Fairbairn ever gave was to the Glenfield Ramblers as long ago as the winter of 1899, when the subject was "Wild Bird Lore." He had ever the interests of the Society at heart, and many times led in person on rambles over the moors. His contributions to its Annals include papers on the wild



birds of Ayrshire, wild birds of Ailsa Craig, field archaeology, and also on Scottish archaeology, of which he had such wide experience.

It was about the beginning of the First World War that I first began to take an interest in his work, when Col. Baird and he found and excavated a number of hut dwellings on the south side of the railway near Wellwood House. His keen eye was always on the lookout for interesting signs, and in this the district proved a rich field. In fact he found far more objects than it proved possible to inspect, for he had done research on no fewer than thirty-one sites in this parish alone. Among these were a number of mediaeval forts, one at least later converted to a ewe milking bucht; the cairn on top of Wardlaw, which proved to be the grave of a Bronze Age chief from which some interesting relics were recovered; and a great number of Stone Age burials. In the summer of 1925 Lady Broun-Lindsay, F.S.A. (Scot.), and Mr. Fairbairn excavated the foundations of the house at Priesthill, where John Brown, the Covenanter, was shot down in cold blood before his wife and little children. There had been some controversy about the exact site, for the present-day Priesthill is a good half mile distant, but Mr. Fairbairn's deductions were correct and the building was found where he said it would be. This was one of a number of excavations of which I was privileged to do the ground plan. Evidently after the tragedy the place was allowed to fall into decay, and being some distance from the road as well as from the present farm there had been little disturbance of the ground. There, still in place, were the central hearth, the stone doorstep, and the stable-cum-byre, with the midden opposite, as was the custom of those times. A good number of relics were unearthed here, including the remains of a blue woollen coat and a great number of churchwarden pipe heads. When all had been investigated the site was again covered with turf to preserve it further from vandals. Another place he had planned to excavate was the ruin of an old chapel on Greenock Water, where (tradition says) the first monks in the parish had settled in very early times. At the Reformation the stones were "dinged down," and the monks given the ground at Priesthill, which, according to Mr. Fairbairn, was how the place received its name. Being much higher and even bleaker life there would be enough to daunt all but the stoutest hearts, but nevertheless it has been recorded that two of the monks, probably fairly youthful when cast out from the chapel, lived there for many years after.

Another excavation which was of particular interest to me was carried out near Carnwath at the farm of Yardhouses. It was in a list of addresses in a book written by my great-great-grandfather that we noticed the name of the farm spelt as Eardhouses, and thus the transition to Earthhouses was easy. In passing, we found by the same medium that the farm of Woolfords, so well-known for its Blackface sheep, was originally spelt Wolfroads, and situated as it is on the Lang Whang would be most appropriately named.

Probably one of the most extensive undertakings, so far as work was concerned, was the excavation of Donald's Isle in Loch Doon, eventually to be submerged when the water level was raised to make it a storage loch for water power. In Smith's *Prehistoric Man in Ayrshire* it is stated that the relics there may have been monks' cells, and that they had been opened, but when or by whom was not known. Mr. Fairbairn, with a number of willing helpers, carried out an exhaustive examination of the site and made some interesting discoveries. He believed there might be a link between this and the St. Donan remains on the Isle of Eigg. I understand that Bruce's old castle on a small island at the head of the loch was partly removed to the mainland and rebuilt, so far as the outside stones are concerned, but he was doubtful if any part of the island remains would be visible above the water.

Mr. Fairbairn was a perfervid Scot, and took the greatest interest in the relics of the Covenanting period, especially in our locality. He had done much research on the subject, and found that in the battle of Airds Moss, when Richard Cameron was killed and Hackston of Rathillet captured, only about one hundred men took part. In passing, it may interest the reader to know that a ring formerly belonging to Hackston has been for two hundred and fifty years in the parish, and is now in the possession of Miss Pearson of Crofthead. It was given to an ancestor by Hackston himself as a token of gratitude for hiding him after the murder of Archbishop Shaip on Magus Muir, and I have seen and handled the ring. Once when a party was out shooting, the Cameron monument was sighted, and a captain present showed some interest in it. Colonel Baird informed him that it had been erected to commemorate the death of the Covenanters who had died there fighting. "Serve 'em jolly well right, too," said the English captain. Mr. Fairbairn was very angry when he overheard this remark, but kept silent for the time being. On nearing the monument the captain approached him and asked what the Covenanters were fighting for. He replied that they were fighting for freedom to worship God in the way they preferred, and added, "And if the Government tried to force their chosen mode of worship on us once more, we would do the same again." And Mr. Fairbairn certainly would.

Another remark concerned the death of John Brown at Priesthill. The paper on the excavation of the site caused some controversy, I understand, but as he knew the ground so well there was no gain-saying Mr. Fairbairn's opinion. He said that from his experience there was only one track of hard ground by which a troop of horsemen could approach the dwelling, and that they were most certainly led to the place by a guide. He also added that as a soldier Claverhouse may have carried out his duty, but in doing what he did before the victim's wife and children he was certainly no gentleman. When the Ayrshire Pageant was given in Ayr in 1934 his help was sought



and most willingly given, for one of the scenes depicted was the drama at Priesthill.

For many years Mr. Fairbairn was President and later Vice-President of the local Lapraik Burns Club, and it was in 1914 that through its efforts a cairn was erected on the spot believed to be the site of Lapraik's own house, long since removed. He was living in the present Wee Dalfram, still in habitable condition, when the poem which drew Burns's attention to him was penned. *Re Tibbie Pagan* Mr. Fairbairn wrote: "There is a very full account of Tibbie in *The Contemporaries of Burns*, a book I have always intended to secure, and now it is almost rare. Tibbie suffers from the same cause as Burns suffers—sensation-mongers who do not scruple to publish what is more or less untrue, quite forgetting that Burns and Tibbie lived in different times from ours. I have heard ministers holding forth in a manner surprising to anyone who had any knowledge of the customs of bygone days." Here I may mention that it was through the good offices of the late Mr. Dugald Baird of Kaimshill, then manager of Muirkirk Ironworks, that the monuments at Tibbie's Brig and at Macadam's Kilns were erected.

Mr. Fairbairn's interests were legion. For example, the Muirkirk Pipe Band came into being largely through his efforts, and was fully equipped with kilts as well as with drums and pipes, on which he was no mean performer himself. On more than one occasion he did some research into ancient pipe music. His knowledge of geology was more extensive than most were aware of, especially of local stratification and the effect of the Ice Age on the contours. He was an expert on grouse and on heather diseases, and his help and advice on these subjects were sought from afar and given willingly. It may not be generally known that he was invited by Dr. Wilson to join Captain Scott's famous expedition to the South Pole, that gallant effort which ended so tragically. He would have gone as naturalist, but much as this prospect appealed to him he felt that his duty to his mother and sister came first, and thus he had to decline the tempting invitation. Among his friends he counted Lady Broun-Lindsay, F.S.A. (Scot.), Mr. A. O. Curle, Mr. Graham Callander, Professor Gordon Childe, and innumerable others in every walk of life.

Towards the end of his days Mr. Fairbairn was unable to do much archaeological work owing to the poor health of his sister and the war-time difficulty of obtaining adequate help. But it was impossible for him to retire, and to the end he had his favourite pony, then pensioned off, and an old gun dog. He died on 5th February, 1945, surviving his sister by only a few days, and by his passing he left the world a poorer place.

I should like to record my indebtedness to Mr. A. G. McLeod, M.A., F.S.A. (Scot.), of Darvel, for his help in collating some of the material for this little tribute to Mr. Fairbairn's memory.